

WHAT'S NEXT?

Using Workplace Divided Data to Help Incorporate Workers' Perceptions in Workplace Discrimination and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Policies

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Since 2022, the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey has been exploring workers' perceptions of and experiences with racial and ethnic discrimination at work and opinions of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and practices. The study, funded by WorkRise at the Urban Institute, included collaborations with NORC at the University of Chicago, an expert advisory panel, and Delaware State University. The study included a survey, conducted in November and December 2022, using a comprehensive, national probability-based sample of 3,277 full- and part-time U.S. workers, including 605 Asian-American workers, 915 Black workers, 802 Latino workers, and 955 white workers in both English and Spanish. To promote this study and share its findings, the Heldrich Center hosted a workforce diversity and inclusion forum in October 2023. More than 100 stakeholders from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors were in attendance. The forum featured a distinguished panel of speakers representing academia, government, and business.

The *Workplace Divided* project examined the attitudes and experiences of Asian-American, Black, Latino, and white workers. Survey results from the study were shared with employers and policymakers to help eliminate the actual and perceived biases and discrimination that pervade hiring decisions, advancement opportunities, and the climate of the workplace. The goals of the project were to conduct a landscape study of workers' perceptions and opinions about three sub-topics:

SUB-TOPICS

- 1 The problem of racial and ethnic discrimination in the workplace;
- 2 The role that diversity, equity, and inclusion play in the workplace; and
- 3 The solutions that workers perceive as impactful or effective to address discrimination, diversity, equity, and inclusion to improve the economic mobility of workers of color, especially women and low-wage workers.

Using opinion surveys and qualitative interviews, the study documented the current reality of racial and demographic disparity in the workplace. As it relates to opinions about diversity, equity, inclusion, and discrimination, the project also explored strategies, policies, procedures, and programs that could contribute to improving diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging and reducing workplace discrimination, in the United States. In preparing the survey, Heldrich Center researchers completed a comprehensive review of the literature on workplace discrimination, interviewed subject-matter experts, conducted a pilot survey fielded by NORC at the University of Chicago, and completed 18 individual interviews with workers to test question-wording in the survey. Following the nationwide survey, Heldrich Center researchers conducted 20 in-depth, one-on-one interviews with workers to explore the nuances of the issues raised in the survey.

The project is unique in its landscape study of workplace discrimination and diversity, equity, and inclusion in that it described complex situations and circumstances, explored innovative ideas and concepts, and highlighted substantive findings to inform various audiences. With the culmination of the Heldrich Center's project activities, this policy brief summarizes two ways in which the project findings may be used by policymakers, researchers, employers, and workers for their own research needs.



Approach #1

Using the *Workplace Divided* semi-structured interview protocols and selected findings to provide context to survey questions asked of hundreds of respondents and to inform future research efforts related to measuring and talking about discrimination, diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace.

The 18 half-hour interviews conducted in August and September 2022 of pilot survey respondents and the 20 30- to 45-minute virtual interviews conducted in March to May 2023 of main survey respondents are conversations with workers who participated in the national surveys and agreed to be contacted after participating to further discuss their ideas and experiences. While these experiences and opinions may not necessarily be representative of a larger population, the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to derive detail, context, and perspective about concepts that might not be ascertained through survey data. In the pilot survey interviews, workers indicated that unfair treatment or discrimination because of race and ethnicity is a major or minor problem in their workplace and in workplaces in general. These data informed the design of the main survey questionnaire. In the main interviews, workers indicated in the survey that they have racial and ethnic diversity in their current workplace and think discrimination because of race or ethnicity is a major problem in their current workplace (in some cases, workers revealed in the interviews that they thought about their industry when answering this question). These data provided additional context to the quantitative survey data collected through the main survey. The workplaces represented in these interviews include but are not limited to pharmacies, grocery stores, colleges/universities, warehouses, hospitals, laboratories, technology/software development companies, and banks/financial institutions. The samples of workers varied in terms of racial and ethnic background, age, gender, employment type, and length of tenure in their current job.

Table 1 includes the list of questions asked of respondents in the pilot semi-structured interviews and Table 2 lists the questions in the main semi-structured interviews. Table 3 summarizes questions asked of respondents in the individual interviews about reducing workplace discrimination and improving diversity, equity, and inclusion; selected responses from workers; and considerations that employers and policymakers might make in the future.¹

¹ Given the semi-structured nature of the unique interview phases and the propensity for respondents to select the anecdotes and opinions they were interested in communicating to researchers, many that were unique to their own experiences, responses were summarized and quotations were selected to provide context to the survey data.

Table 1: Voices of Workers, Interview Questions (pilot survey protocol)

Primary Interview Questions	Follow-Up Questions
I would like to ask you about your current job. Tell me about your work on a day-to-day basis.	How often do you go to work? Who do you typically interact with on a day-to-day basis? What type of work activities do you do on a typical day?
Thinking about how workers like you think about their workplaces...do you think most workers feel like they are included (comfortable, matter) in the workplace or not?	<p>What does inclusivity in the workplace mean to you? What about diversity?</p> <p>Possible follow-ups: Unintentional or intentional actions that may make a worker feel not included or treated unfairly (such as micro-aggressions, jokes, lack of competency, isolation etc.). Use bias/discrimination wording if appropriate for the specific interview (if mentioned by respondent).</p>
And thinking about the ways in which you interact with your colleagues, your supervisors (if applicable), and visitors, would you say you feel like you are treated fairly in your workplace? Why or why not? In what ways?	Looking back on your other experience, would you say that happened because you were treated unfairly? Or was it because of other factors?
Other than your work environment, how satisfied are you with other aspects of your job? Do you think you are treated fairly when it comes to something like your potential for advancement, compared to your colleagues?	<p>[Probe: Job security, your work performance and productivity, your productivity at home (if necessary), the assignments you get.]</p> <p>And thinking about your work, in what ways are you comfortable or not comfortable talking to a supervisor, manager, or human resources colleague about your needs and experiences as a worker? (Scale of 1 to 10)</p>
How can employers better support workers?	Thinking about some of the issues you brought about (workplaces/your workplace), are there things that (your employer/employers) can do to help workers feel (more included, they are being treated fairly, they are comfortable, they matter)?
What are your opinions about the various terms asked in the survey?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difference between “unfair treatment” and “discrimination” verbiage. • Race, ethnicity, background, “people of color.” • Diversity, equity, inclusion: Terms and labelling.

Table 2: Voices of Workers, Interview Questions (main survey protocol)

Primary Interview Questions	Follow-Up Questions
<p>As you recall, you recently completed an AmeriSpeak® survey asking you about your experiences with diversity, equity, inclusion, and discrimination in the workplace. You indicated that your race or your ethnicity has made it [insert based on survey response — harder or easier] for you to succeed at work. In what ways has your race or your ethnicity affected your success at work?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you feel this way now, in the past, or both? • How has this affected your satisfaction with your work and your productivity at work today? • Are you thinking about your race (your ethnicity), both, or is it combined with some other personal characteristic, such as your gender?
<p>In the survey, you indicated that there have been situations in the past where a colleague has gotten a promotion or pay raise faster than you did because of your race or ethnicity. What happened — was it a pay raise, a promotion, or both?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When did this happen? • How did this experience make you feel? • How certain are you that it was race or ethnicity that was the reason for the experience? • What did you learn from the experience if anything? • How does this affect your satisfaction with your work and productivity at work today, if at all?
<p>Now, I would like to ask you about your current job. Tell me about your work on a day-to-day basis.</p>	<p>How often do you go to work? Who do you typically interact with on a day-to-day basis? What type of work activities do you do on a typical day?</p>
<p>You indicated that discrimination because of race or ethnicity is a major problem in your workplace. Can you give me an example of what you have observed or experienced that led you to indicate that discrimination is a major problem?</p>	<p>How much do each of the following contribute to the problem? Intentional prejudice of individual people at work; existing policies, procedures, or systems in the workplace; unconscious bias of people at work.</p>
<p>What can help improve these situations at your workplace? On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you think each of the following help? Required training for employees given on a regular basis; optional training for employees; policies to ensure equality in pay, hiring practices, or promotions; a task force or committee, or group, to deal with these issues; anonymous reporting hotline; mentoring program; clear anti-discrimination policy; single person/employee responsible for these issues in the business; required training for white managers, supervisors, leaders; employee surveys.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why or why not? [Probe: Companies’ intentions, size of company, need.] • Do you know what they are? • Do you have them in your workplace?

Table 3: Voices of Workers, Selected Interview Findings

We Asked...	Workers Said...	Workers in Their Own Words...	Let's Consider...
<p>Does a single person responsible for these issues help? Do task forces, committees, or groups in the workplace help?</p>	<p>When it comes to leadership, what matters is what fits the company best.</p> <p>Many interviewees said that one person should not oversee diversity, equity, and inclusion. Can a single person effect change? Can a single person bring their own bias? Can one department succeed in these issues, while others don't, because this individual is housed at a corporate level?</p>	<p>"From my experience, task forces have people from different departments and have different viewpoints. It's like a jury on a trial. There's not like one person saying it. There's a higher chance of discussion about problems, higher chance that someone may have heard about it, or something happened to them, or a friend has talked to you or a colleague to you. A task force would be more objective than just one person."</p>	<p>Reimagining the role of human resources and diversity, equity, and inclusion executives, managers, and frontline staff, especially in workplaces where corporate policies, procedures, and programs may not necessarily trickle down to distinctive locations, departments, and teams in the organization.</p>
<p>How helpful are companies' policies and procedures?</p>	<p>Corporate policies and procedures may be helpful, but in places like pharmacies, grocery stores, hospitals, and warehouses, or where workers interact with vendors or customers, corporate policies and procedures won't help when an issue arises, particularly when not accompanied by reporting pathways that are not trusted or seem to be unavailable or not worth using.</p>	<p>"Sometimes we talk about the corporation, but from my experience, it ultimately comes down to the department. It may not happen in one department, but it may happen in yours, unfortunately."</p>	<p>Investing in more robust reporting pathways for incidents of discrimination, especially when it comes to privacy and trust, witnessing discrimination incidents, the role that perception plays in reporting discrimination, and laying the groundwork for tangible action following an incident report.</p>
<p>Do you have policies to ensure equality in hiring, pay, and/or promotions?</p>	<p>Most workers said they have these policies but some suggested that communicating these policies should be tied to training and culture. The meaning behind keywords such as "diversity" and "equity" and how these terms are measured in the workplace should also be communicated to workers.</p>	<p>"So, the thinking is that diversity is probably easy to achieve. It's just to have a diversity. Different people. But then equity is harder to achieve, so then, to prioritize that, and to be clear that point. That is put first. That was the rationale that I remember people mentioning."</p>	<p>Demonstrating that the organization values diversity, equity, and inclusion in specific ways that are distinctive to the culture and operations of the organization.</p>
<p>Should training be required? Optional? Held on a regular basis? Required for some but not others?</p>	<p>Workers talked about the complexities of regular and optional trainings, including requiring annual trainings that are never updated to the specific issues that need to be addressed at their own workplaces; how ineffective and impersonal electronic trainings can be, even though they are convenient; and whether optional trainings will reach the workers or managers who need it.</p>	<p>"I don't think like repetitive things like that are very helpful, I think they need to like as the world kind of changes around you, and as people's attitudes around certain topics kind of like change, they should be updated."</p> <p>"You know, then people would be more comfortable because you're around your peers, and if one person speaks up, and then there's another person that can relate to that situation that it may make them want to be more comfortable in speaking up and explaining situations that they've had."</p>	<p>Linking employee surveys/check-ins with workplace training design and finding ways to customize these activities in ways that are responsive, current, and personal.</p>

Approach #2

Using *Workplace Divided* quantitative survey data, archived for public use, to encourage further substantive and methodological research.

The research team has archived all quantitative survey data in Cornell University's Roper Center for Public Opinion Research's Roper iPoll archive. The data are available for use publicly by any individual or organization that agrees to use and cite the data according to the Roper Center's guidelines. In addition to the dataset, available materials include the survey questionnaire in English and the methodology report. Table 4 summarizes suggestions for how interested parties may approach using the survey data to help answer additional research questions, target certain populations of workers, investigate specific independent or dependent variables, or achieve other goals.



Table 4: Voices of Workers: Using the Survey Data for Future Research

Approach	Audience	Justification	Caveat	Examples (with associated survey question)
Derive details and context of workplace discrimination, combining open-ended and closed-ended questions.	Policymakers, employers, advocacy groups, workers	Weave a “story” of discrimination and unfair treatment experiences, from start to finish.	Limited to survey questions asked of the respondents.	See here for a list of the open-ended survey questions asked in the survey, including responses to the question about the details of an unfair treatment/discrimination experience, asking “What happened?” (Q22, Q53).
Preview answers to specific questions, open-ended and closed-ended.	Employers	Assist with measurement, approach, and reporting of survey data within workplaces and of samples of workers.	Altering wording of survey questions (due to updates, additional needs) will affect responses.	The survey includes a question about a battery of discrimination experiences that may have occurred in the worker’s current and/or previous job (Q26), finding that workers report experiences of discrimination in previous jobs more often than those in current jobs.
Uncover the meaning behind important, salient, or sensitive verbiage.	Policymakers, researchers, employers	Offer insight on wording of definitions, question stems, and question items.	Survey questions should not be viewed in a vacuum; the order of questions may affect responses.	The survey instrument and interview protocols used half-samples to test unfair treatment vs. discrimination wording (for example, QWORK2); settled on “...what you consider to be discrimination because of race and/or ethnicity” given the value of perceived discrimination experiences to workers when asking about discrimination; and referenced “diversity, equity, inclusion, and/or reducing discrimination” in questions throughout the survey.
Disaggregate experiences and/or opinions by social and/or demographic characteristics of interest.	Policymakers, researchers, advocacy groups, employers	Investigate specific subpopulations that are of interest to the organization, locality, industry, or other.	Take care in limited sample size available and associated statistical error.	There are many opportunities in the data to look at specific subpopulations of the U.S. workforce, including by income and age. The study looked at the experiences of Black women and the relationship between discrimination experiences and mobility for this subpopulation of U.S. workers. The study also asked workers if they are managers or supervisors themselves (QSSUP).
Track national opinions and experiences about discrimination, diversity, equity, and inclusion over time.	Policymakers, researchers, advocacy groups, employers	Monitor trends in opinions and experiences to justify policy interventions.	To make appropriate trend comparisons, use comparable sample and weighting scheme.	Policymakers might consider tracking the problem of workplace discrimination in one’s own workplace (Q10) and/or associated interventions and solutions present in the workplace (Q62) over time in response to salient issues, solutions, and political, economic, and social events.

Archived materials on the Roper website for public use include a labeled dataset in SPSS format (with the option to import the file to other statistical packages), a codebook, the survey questionnaire, and the methodology report. [Access it here.](#)



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE PROJECT, SPONSORS, AND AFFILIATES

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ABOUT THE HELDRICH CENTER

The [Heldrich Center for Workforce Development](#) at Rutgers University is devoted to transforming the workforce development system at the local, state, and federal levels. The center, located within the Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, provides an independent source of analysis for reform and innovation in policymaking and employs cutting-edge research and evaluation methods to identify best practices in workforce development, education, and employment policy. It is also engaged in significant partnerships with the private sector, workforce organizations, and educational institutions to design effective education and training programs. It is deeply committed to assisting job seekers and workers attain the information, education, and skills training they need to move up the economic ladder.

As captured in its slogan, “Solutions at Work,” the Heldrich Center is guided by a commitment to translate the strongest research and analysis into practices and programs that companies, community-based organizations, philanthropy, and government officials can use to strengthen their workforce and workforce readiness programs, create jobs, and remain competitive. The center’s work strives to build an efficient labor market that matches workers’ skills and knowledge with the evolving demands of employers.